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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses recent trends in the field of after-school education and addresses how today's climate of after-school education promotes a pro-learning/anti-development stance, albeit unintentionally. It uses research from one urban after-school program to illustrate this point, framing staff and children's understanding of the developmental opportunities provided by the program within the micro-context of the program structure and the macro-context of the field of after-school education. The data that emerged over the course of 1 year include the perspectives of the administrative staff, the program staff, and the children and incorporates both qualitative and quantitative indicators of developmental opportunities. The paper argues that an understanding of development is often more visceral than cognitive and that work that articulates the relationship between learning and development needs to occur if after-school education is to remain a developmental presence in urban communities. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/SM)

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ED 462 507

The Developmental Opportunities Provided by After School

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Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss recent trends in the field of after-school education and address how today's climate of after-school education promotes a pro-learning/anti-development stance, albeit unintentionally. I will use my work in one urban after-school program to illustrate this point, framing staff and children's understanding of the developmental opportunities provided by the program within the micro-context of the program structure and the macro-context of the field of after-school education. The data that emerged over the course of one year is inclusive of the perspectives of the administrative staff, the program staff, and the children and incorporates both qualitative and quantitative indicators of developmental opportunities. I will argue that an understanding of development is often more visceral than cognitive and that work that articulates the relationship between learning and development needs to occur if after-school education is to remain a developmental presence in urban communities. *Paper presented to the Robert Bowne Foundation Participatory Evaluation Group, December 2001, New York.* *This work was supported by a PSC-CUNY grant, #61781-00-30.*

Introduction

It's not about learning about the dinosaur but learning how to use the available resources to extract information and use that information towards a goal. (Educational Coordinator)

When a kid who is shy is now able to address an audience as an expert, I see first hand the changes in kids' literacy, oral skills, and presentation skills. (Literacy Coordinator)

I see changes in the program. It's more cohesive. I think as a result of staff development {and their capacity to create a theme-based approach} kids are learning how to like learning. (Program Coordinator)

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These statements come from the administrative staff of one urban after-school program and emerge from images of real children who the staff have nurtured and watched grow. For some, they might suggest that the after-school program helps children gain cognitive strategies for learning, improves literacy and communication skills, and promotes a love of learning. Seen from a different angle, these statements also reflect a broader vision of the role of after-school programs. That is, as children are given opportunities that stretch their cognitive and emotional capacities, their learning helps them to develop --- the child "who is shy" but learns how to address the audience as an expert or the child who is disinterested in school but learns how to like learning now have options not initially available or accessible to them. While after-school programs help children to learn, they also provide opportunities for children to develop in qualitatively different ways.

The relationship between learning and development is probably one of the most elusive constructs in psychology. However, as Lev Vygotsky states, "the problems encountered in the psychological analysis of teaching cannot be correctly resolved or even formulated without addressing the relation between learning and development in school-age children" (1978, p. 79). From my perspective, and particularly in today's climate of standards and accountability, to address the relation between learning and development is imperative if developmental opportunities for young people, particularly those living in low-income urban communities, are to be protected. In this paper, I will discuss recent trends in the field of after-school education and address how today's climate of after-school education promotes a pro-learning/anti-development stance, albeit unintentionally. Using my work in one urban after-school program, I will illustrate this point, framing staff and children's understanding of the developmental opportunities provided by the program within the micro-context of the program structure and the macro-context of the field of after-school education. I will argue that an understanding of development is often more visceral than cognitive and that work that articulates the relationship between learning and development needs to occur if after-school education is to remain a developmental presence in urban communities.

The Climate of After School Education

Historically, local and national community agencies were largely responsible for running after-school programs (e.g., the Boy Scouts, 4H Clubs, Girls Inc.). Often these agencies were not

associated with "school" and in fact offered services sorely needed given the dysfunction of most inner-city schools. Research has continuously shown that instruction in inner-city schools is unchallenging and based on low-level rote material (Anyon, 1997; Oakes, 1990). Community-based agencies tend to believe that children need respite from school-related pressures, opportunities to experience and explore other domains, and time just to be children. They often emphasize the development of the whole child, utilize children's strengths as resources in program planning, and adopt a pedagogy that involves hands-on and cooperative learning. In many instances, such programs remain critical to the development and success of inner-city youth (Heath & McLaughlin, 1996). As McLaughlin (2001) states of sixty young people who participated in such programs, "Contrary to predictions that they would be dead or in jail before they left adolescence, most of these young men and women, now in their 20's, are set firmly on positive pathways as workers, parents, and community members" (p. 15).

Recent trends place these community-based youth programs at risk. With the advent of the government's 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the number of schools offering after-school programs in rural and inner-city communities has increased to over 20,000. These Learning Centers offer tutoring, homework assistance, literacy, science, math, gym, computers, and art; however, their main goal is to improve academic achievement (Kopacsi & Walker, 2000; Larner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999). In fact, while after-school programs are organized to meet a wide range of purposes, in the urban neighborhood, tutoring and prevention predominate (Halpern, 1999; Quinn, 1999).

Some have suggested that the recent push for after-school programs to focus on academics is politically situated in international comparisons. The United States has a history of investing in its youth "when they have steered off course" (Dryfoos, 1999, p. 109). This trend is not without its adversaries. Many advocate that community partners continue to assume primary responsibility for working with children after school. As Halpern (1999) states, "it will be difficult for school-age programs to create the psychological space children need if there is too much pressure to serve instrumental purposes" (p. 93). Unfortunately, this instrumental purpose (academic gains) often positions learning in opposition to development.

Developmental Environments

Programs that focus on "fixing" problems (including academic ones) do not necessarily address the need to create healthy, developmental environments for young people. Environments of growth share a view of youth as resources, not deficits (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). They create "places of hope" through listening to youth, and bringing adults and youth together for constructive purposes (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Glover (1995) speaks of creating a "therapeutic milieu" for promoting youth development. In such a milieu, young people have responsibilities and challenging experiences within the programs, actively participate in problem solving and decision making, and are treated with high expectations and respect (Quinn, 1999; Zeldin, 1995). This "therapeutic milieu" contributes to children's development in ways not often experienced by children during school (Neito, 1994). For instance, in contexts that create meaningful learning experiences, youth report that there are greater opportunities to make a contribution, be respected by their peers, and examine important personal values -- opportunities not perceived by youth as available during school (Hecht & Fusco, 1996).

Opportunities provided during these after-school hours might be lost with increasing pressures to make the grade. While helping students to improve academic skills is a worthwhile pursuit, to set off on this course without considering development often translates into an "empty" approach to education. It is not enough to offer tutoring so that children who are falling behind can "catch up." Development requires opportunities to learn in ways that creatively stretch one's capacities (not just cognitive capacities) (Vygotsky, 1978). While tutoring can be very effective, I would argue that it is most effective in cases where the learner actively seeks to improve certain skills because it is beneficial towards their pursuits; they see its relation to the totality of their lives. However, many children living in urban inner cities do not see the connection between the pursuit of school and their futures (Neito, 1994) and in fact, school success is often associated with the loss of cultural identity (Delpit, 1995). Urban youth need to be reached politically, not just academically (Anyon, 1997). They need opportunities to be successful without the loss of cultural identity. Youth development models create pursuits of interest to urban youth (e.g., producing a community video, an online newsletter, a dance performance, a mural). Towards such pursuits, young people take on new roles and responsibilities, and learn what they need to learn to reach their goals.

Through this research, I will describe one urban after-school program that struggled with its vision to promote development because of external pressures to produce instrumental results. I will argue that the after-school staff had a visceral understanding of development, though did not articulate their understanding in developmental terms. I therefore bring to their statements a particular interpretation -- a sociocultural and sociopolitical interpretation.

The Research Context

The present case study was designed to understand the benefits of an after-school program within the context of a *professional community of inquiry*. The community of inquiry involved the staff in a process by which they could examine their program goals and activities, design a classroom-based research methodology to examine questions they had about their practices, collect and then reflect on data. This bottom-up process allowed the research questions to emerge from and with the program staff (Sheingold, Heller, & Paulukonis, 1995). I was interested in allowing the staff to define learning and development in the context of their everyday practice.

The program staff included six group leaders and six assistants. Each group leader, and assistant, is responsible for one classroom of approximately fifteen to twenty children. The children, ages six through fifteen, are divided into classrooms by age and gender. They attend the program five days a week and engage in a variety of academic and enrichment activities including homework help, literacy, science, computers, recreation, and art. In addition, special events are scheduled throughout the year, e.g., talent shows, trips to museums or parks, and nature walks. The mission of the program is "to promote literacy and a love of learning in a child-centered, family-friendly, comfortable, and safe environment."

Over the course of one year, I met with the group leaders and assistants in the community of inquiry four times.[1] Separate interviews were conducted with the administrative staff. In addition, the children and youth in the program received a survey to assess their perceptions of the developmental opportunities provided by the program and by school. The data that emerged over the course of one year is used to examine perceptions of development through the perspectives of the administrative staff, the program staff, and the children.

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[1] In addition, I conducted an evaluation of this program the year prior to this research, and thus already had a relationship with the program staff and an understanding of the program itself.

A Community of Inquiry

The community of inquiry process began with the staff identifying the potential outcomes among children who participate in the after-school program. Identifying such outcomes was facilitated by the opening statement I posed to the group, *I believe that (the after-school program) is important in the lives of children because it supports* _____. Their responses were as follows:

reading and writing skills
math skills
communication skills
keeping kids safe
the chance to socialize with peers
completing their homework
doing something other than watching T.V.
the expression of feelings
self-esteem and confidence
finding someone who they can trust

Interestingly, staff did not feel capable of reaching these outcomes equally. When asked how well they were able to achieve each outcome, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), they rated their capacity to achieve academic outcomes (reading, writing, math) between 2 and 2.5. However, they felt that they achieve affective/social outcomes (socialization, self-esteem, and expression of feelings) more successfully - between 4 and 6, six being beyond the scale; they were that passionate about what they are doing. Their beliefs about the role of the after-school program in promoting children's social and emotional well-being were reinforced by the following statements:

At (the after-school program) we _____ *so that kids* _____.

We bring joy & love so that kids can have self-esteem and self-respect.

We smile so that kids feel welcome.

We make it fun so that kids can tell other kids and join as well.

We express our thoughts and feelings, good or bad, so that kids understand that everyone has a voice.

Ideally, the group might have designed a methodology to test their hypotheses about improving affective and social, but not academic, outcomes. Since this was not possible, I

worked with the staff's concerns and questions to design a methodology that reflected their inquires. Out of this process, the After-School Youth Survey (ASYS) was developed. The ASYS was created to assess children's views of the developmental opportunities provided by school and the after-school program. The survey includes two forms (School and AfterSchool) with twenty identical items. The items were developed to reflect the literature in best practices in youth development and after-school education and reflect at least three separate factors: I. Affect/Social Support - I enjoy my time here; Adults listen to what I have to say; II. Developmental Learning - I accomplish things I never thought I could; I do things I've never done before; III. Participation - I help make decisions about what we do; I help plan activities and projects. Children respond to each item on a Likert-scale from 1, Never True to 5, Almost Always True.

Fifty-seven children enrolled in the after-school program completed the ASYS. Of the 57 children, there were 26 boys and 31 girls ranging in age from six to fifteen years old. Twenty-one children were in grades K-2; twenty-nine were in grades 3-6; and seven were in grades 7-9. With support, all children could complete the survey; however, the survey worked best with children ages eight and up.

The results suggest that staff and children had similar perceptions of the developmental opportunities provided by the after-school program. Namely, that the program supports affective and social outcomes but might be less effective in promoting academic ones.[2] The mean responses were higher for items in the Affect/Social Support category than the Developmental Learning category (see Tables 1 and 2). Sixty-six percent of participants reported that they almost always have people they can talk to at the after-school program (Item 20) and forty-nine percent reported that adults almost always listen to what they have to say (Item 7). Close to 70% of the participants reported that they often or almost always feel good about themselves when they are at the after-school program (Item 18) and that their thoughts and feelings are respected (Item 10). Interestingly, they were less likely to report that they are supported to learn new things (Item 5), do things never done before (Item 12), do things they don't know how to do (Item 14), or do things now that they couldn't do before (Item 17).

[2] I use "might be" because academic outcomes were not directly measured and children's understanding of learning might be limited to school learning; school is the place where they "learn" and after-school is where they have fun.

Perhaps most striking is that while the children do not feel as if they are learning *new* things, they do believe that they are learning because they are having fun (Item 15 -- for 53% this was almost always true) and that they are participating in activities that are interesting (Item 1 -- for 60% this was almost always true). Further, children reported that this playful, fun environment for learning (Item 19) after school is different from that during school (t = -2.69, df = 53, p = .01). The mean response for this item was 3.66 (sd = 1.36) on the After School form and 2.89 (sd = 1.73) on the School form. Whereas 40% of the participants felt that *teachers* often or almost always make work feel like play, 58% felt the *after-school instructors* were likely to create such an environment. However, regardless of this playful environment, the participants also reported that they are more likely to get the support they need to learn new things and are more likely to be able to do things now that they couldn't do before in school, rather than in the after-school program (see Table 3).

Micro-Context of the Results

Interested in the discrepancy between academic and social outcomes, staff identified the obstacles that they face in trying to improve children's learning. One obstacle was the schedule. The children and staff begin to arrive at the after-school program at 3:00 p.m. and head to the gymnasium. Once gathered, the groups travel with their group leaders to their respective classrooms. Between 3:30 and 4:00 p.m. attendance is taken and the children eat a snack. From 4:00 to 4:45 p.m., the children do their homework. From 4:45 to 5:15, they go to the gym, do an art activity, read a book, write in their journals, or play a game. At 5:15 they switch activities depending on the schedule and by 5:45 they begin cleaning up for a 6:00 p.m. dismissal. The group leaders felt that it was impossible to accomplish anything constructive within a 30-minute period. Similar to the complaints of many teachers, one group leader stated, "By the time you get going with something it's time to do something else." In addition, the children receive so much homework that it is not possible for them to complete it within 45 minutes, particularly given that "they've been in school all day" and "they're jumping out of their pants."

Another consideration for their capacity to produce a successful program was the leadership style within the organization. The staff felt that there was little room for creativity because they "are told exactly what to do." One group leader stated, "I was told, 'We use the finger method of discipline here!' So I could not use my method of clapping. You tell me, what's

the difference?" Another group leader chimed in stating "basically we are robots. . . At one of the meetings we were told we cannot even sit down. Even if you're helping a child with homework, you have to stand." The staff interpreted this autocracy as a lack of trust and felt it was the "biggest problem we have."

Based on these constraints, it would seem reasonable that children are not learning *new* things. However, a deeper (macro-contextual) analysis is warranted. In the following discussion, I will address the question: Why did these constraints exist and what were/are their effects on the development of the program, the staff, and the children?

Macro-Context of the Results

When the Executive Director of the after-school program was approached with the idea for this research, he was eager for me to work with the program staff. The program had recently invested in the development of its staff and was attempting to initiate a theme-based approach to literacy. Such an approach is counter to traditional skill and drill methods and engages children in literacy activities that are interdisciplinary, project-driven, and hands-on. The literacy project occurred twice a week for two hours and addressed some of the issues of a cramped schedule. Simultaneously, the director was receiving pressures from his Board of Directors, many of whom were White and did not live in the community, which was mostly Latino. The Executive Director was also Latino and was the successful result of after-school education. He saw part of his role as educating his Board, as well as, funders. However, he was challenged by questions the board was asking him, such as, Is the program reducing the dropout rate? Is the program improving the third grade standardized reading test scores? The Board wanted documentation of the program's effects, particularly in the area of reading. Because of these pressures, the Director began placing equal pressure on the administrative staff to produce results (academic ones, that is). Staff were given copies of sample third grade reading tests, though no training on how to interpret or address the skills required by the test.

Unfortunately, the capacity of the program to try out new pedagogies was thwarted by the need to produce instrumental results. This top-down pressure had devastating effects on the psyche of the staff and resulted in an autocratic organizational climate. For instance, the program staff voiced their frustrations to me when they did not get to choose the themes for the upcoming literacy project, but were told "Do Rome!" Again, the group leaders felt it was pointless to

express their frustrations because they did not feel as if they would be heard. They were frustrated with the mixed message: Implement this creative pedagogy as a prescribed curriculum. This increased control was also fueled by an unexpected visit of two board members who were not pleased that the staff seemed "unenthusiastic." The new rule of standing during program hours was the result. The schedule of the program was also posted on the bulletin board so that "visitors" would "know exactly what's going on when they walk in the building."

The overall climate of the program began to deteriorate. The staff could not voice their opinions to impact the overall program, nor did they receive the support and resources to make good instructional decisions or have the freedom to try new things. They felt that they were not trusted to do a good job. (Interestingly, the Executive Director expressed similar frustrations.) Decades of research on educational reform offer insights into the contextual factors and processes necessary for organizational and pedagogical development. Namely, relating to teachers as professionals and reflective decision-makers is the foundation for changes in educational practice. It is by involving teachers in the "processes of practical inquiry - whereby teachers examine, reflect on, make sense of, and, when relevant, change their own practice in light of what their inquiry has revealed – that teachers learn and change" (Sheingold, Heller, & Paulukonis, 1995, p. 2). As reflective practitioners, they mucked around with new practices, making discoveries along the way (Schon, 1983). Without engaging in a creative and participatory process, development at any level is not likely to occur; yet, reforms often occur in a top-down fashion undermining teachers' (and students') capacities to think critically, to create, to develop.

Interestingly, though the staff felt they had no room to be creative, their resistance to an autocratic leadership was not expressed by what they do with individual children. They enact on a day-to-day basis the schedule as required and within that predetermined structure they build relationships with the children. When they identified the means by which they reach more affective and social goals they stated things such as, I talk with the children not to them; I give them the attention they need; I try to make things fun; and I allow them to have a voice and express themselves. Reaching children politically (giving them a voice, promoting self-expression, etc.) was seen as critical to their mission. Interestingly, their approach to relationship building is consistent with the data collected from the children. The children feel respected, esteemed, listened to, participate in activities that are interesting, and are learning because they

are having fun. While the children did not report learning new things or being able to do things they couldn't do before, this may be a function of the imprecision of our language to capture the nature of development, e.g., the children may not see "learning how to like learning" as learning a new thing. Learning a new thing is more likely to represent subject matter, so saturated is the term learning with school learning. Another possibility is that the program was attempting to reinforce existing skills rather than offer new ones, e.g., literacy via a theme-based approach. Children would consider that they already know how to read and would not recognize that learning how to research a topic via literature or how to extract information towards a goal is a new skill. Or, the program because of external pressures led to an organizational climate in which staff and children could not be active participants in creating new learning environments.[3] I suspect all have merit.

Discussion

The opportunity to develop comes with the opportunity to embark upon new endeavors. Such endeavors come in many packages (e.g., addressing the audience as an expert, learning how to use a computer, getting a new job). All require the learner to stretch in new ways and occur in a context where learning is embedded in a purposeful and meaningful pursuit. When programs (and students) are required to produce particular results, the tendency is to dissect achievements from the rich sociocultural contexts in which they occur -- multiplication is dissected from engaging in mathematics; decoding is dissected from engaging in literacy; learning about plants is dissected from engaging in science; and all are dissected from the recognition that one has the power and capacity to create learning methodologies. Like the case study illustrated, the pressure to improve third grade reading scores thwarted efforts to engage in a creative, interdisciplinary theme-based approach to literacy.

Improving the academic skills of inner-city youth is essential and should be of primary concern. Thinking that we can do so without also considering the development of youth, and the development of the institutions that serve them, is unwarranted. Using youth's strengths in planning and creating the programs that serve them is the approach often taken in after-school programs that understand urban youth. Such an approach requires flexibility and the recognition that when children are mucking around, their learning is unsystematic. One child may be more

[3] Children's responses on the Participation scale were very low (see Table 2).

likely to learn how to address an audience while another may be more likely to learn how to get along with others. Such learning is connected to children's development because it occurs in a context that is responsive, not negating, of who they are (their interests, their strengths, their capacities). To the extent that after-school programs are being pressured to make up for the deficits of schools, particularly inner-city schools, without understanding the relationship between learning and development, I fear developmental opportunities will be lost.

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Table 1. Percentages of Participant Responses for After School

	Never True	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Always True
1. I participate in activities that are interesting.	5%	4%	20%	11%	60%
2. I enjoy my time here.	7%	4%	22%	21%	46%
3. I can share what I know with other kids.	5%	9%	18%	24%	44%
4. My ideas and comments are taken seriously.	11%	7%	23%	23%	36%
5. I get the support I need to learn new things.	9%	11%	28%	19%	33%
6. We do activities that are challenging.	14.5%	5%	26%	14.5%	40%
7. Adults listen to what I have to say.	6%	4%	19%	22%	49%
8. I accomplish things I never thought I could.	7%	7%	28%	15%	43%
9. I help make decisions about what we do.	11%	5%	46%	16%	22%
10. My thoughts and feelings are respected.	6%	9%	18%	22%	45%
11. I help plan activities and projects.	20%	6%	20%	13%	41%
12. I do things I've never done before.	21%	9%	25%	26%	19%
13. I can learn from my friends.	11%	9%	21%	13%	46%
14. I get to do things I don't know how to do.	11%	4%	26%	19%	40%
15. I'm learning because I'm having fun.	7%	4%	20%	16%	53%
16. I help to create what we're doing.	13%	4%	29%	14%	40%
17. I can do things now that I couldn't do before.	9%	11%	22%	24%	34%
18. I feel good about myself when I am here.	9%	7%	15%	19%	50%
19. Adults make work feel like play.	13%	5%	24%	22%	36%
20. I have people I can talk to here.	5.5%	5.5%	9%	14%	66%

Table 2. Top and Bottom Six Means for After School Items.

Mean	Item	Factor
4.29	I have people I can talk to here.	Affect / Social Support
4.16	I participate in activities that are interesting.	Learning
4.06	Adults listen to what I have to say.	Affect / Social Support
4.04	I'm learning because I'm having fun.	Learning
3.94	I enjoy my time here.	Affect / Social Support
3.93	I feel good about myself when I am here.	Affect / Social Support
3.61	I can do things now that I couldn't do before.	Learning
3.60	We do activities that are challenging.	IV
3.56	I get the support I need to learn new things.	Affect / Social Support
3.48	I help plan activities and projects.	Participation
3.33	I help make decisions about what we do.	Participation
3.13	I do things I've never done before.	Learning

Table 3. Significant Differences between School and After School.

	SCHOOL	AFTER SCHOOL
I get the support I need to learn new things.	4.37	3.56
I can do things now that I couldn't do before.	4.02	3.61
Adults make work feel like play.	2.93	3.64